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## THE “SCIENCE FICTION WORLD” OF PHILIP K. DICK’S *UBIK*

NECROPOLITICS PATAPHYSICAL, SCIENCE FICTION, VIRTUAL

The novel *Ubik* is generally regarded as being Philip K. Dick’s masterpiece. In this major literary work of 1969, the struggle to occupy an “outside” relative to the “inside” of a cybernetic-economic-technological-virtual system is poignantly illustrated. It is a scenario where the “science fiction world” becomes everything, leaving the “safe confines” of a clearly defined literary space that is called a novel. Should science fiction be kept in its place as fiction? Should one feel threatened by the inclination of science fictional quandaries and disruptions to “become the world”? Or is the dualistic rational stance of inside/outside – anything other than letting SF “become the world” – ultimately a miscomprehension of what science fiction is? By letting it “be the world,” does one risk becoming “lost” in science fiction?

In *Ubik*, with his imaginative invention of what is called "the Moratorium," Philip K. Dick has devised the space of a special kind of "science fiction world" as a laboratory or thought experiment where the questions about reality and fiction or outside and inside – and the relationship between the two poles of such dualisms – can be posed. Are these strange phenomena and circumstances happening in the world or is it my own madness? Is it happening in my mind? Dick's "Moratorium" is the "science fiction world" that deals with the difficult challenge of how to define an "outside perspective" with respect to the hegemonic social-technological system. The prevailing Marxist or "critical theory" view in Science Fiction Studies is that SF depicts modes of "cognitive estrangement" in successive phases of capitalism. This approach stays with the reassuring principle of an intact dis-alienating human subject (the scholar himself!) who critically opposes the technologically totalitarian system.

In the future society of *Ubik*, when your body dies, there is still some life-energy and consciousness left within you which can be accessed communicatively by others. You can continue to have subjective experiences in a virtual or "pseudo" world. After you die, you can be put into cryogenic suspension. If properly cared for in a Moratorium, you can exist for years between life and death in a state of "half-life." Your loved ones can "commune" with you, say once a month, when you are periodically woken into the communication mode. Lengthy intervals between contact sessions ensure that your remaining life-energy gets stretched out. Towards the end, a technician of the Swiss Beloved Brethren Moratorium explains to wealthy business owner Glenn Runciter, whose wife Ella died very young at the age of twenty, how the technology of the communing mechanism works. The casket of the deceased is wheeled into a consultation room and her brain is hooked up to a cybernetic electronic circuit.

Joe Chip is a managerial-level employee of Runciter Associates, a "prudence organization" business which offers the service of protecting its clients from invasive acts by people with psionic and telepathic powers. Chip, Runciter, and their team of psi specialists are lured in their spaceship into a trap on the Luna moon by their business rival and arch-enemy Ray Hollis of Hollis Talents. A bomb explodes, and Glenn Runciter is seemingly killed while Chip and the others seemingly survive. Joe Chip, the protagonist of the story, believes that he is alive and Runciter is dead. But he soon comes to understand that the situation is exactly the reverse. Joe is hooked up to the system of the Swiss Moratorium. The apparent world around him which he visually perceives is a virtual world the epistemological status of which is unclear. However, the secret formula substance in a spray-can called "Ubik" is going to keep Joe sane and safe amidst the disorienting circumstance.

Joe experiences the progressive physical decay of the virtual world – a process which corresponds to his own accelerating loss of half-life. It was Joe Chip and his team who indeed were fatally injured in the explosion on Luna. Runciter is outside and Joe Chip is inside. Is that "inside" a legitimate valid world or does it exist merely within Joe's mind?

While inside the pseudo-world that resembles ordinary American life, Joe receives messages from Runciter on various media: the latter's voice on Joe's hotel room vidphone, the voice of the TV announcer, scrawls on matchbook covers and parking tickets, and graffiti on the wall of a public men's restroom that reads: JUMP IN THE URINAL AND STAND ON YOUR HEAD. I'M THE ONE THAT'S ALIVE. YOU'RE ALL DEAD.

In the “science fiction world” in which Joe Chip finds himself, everything is deteriorating or retrogressing. All the cigarettes in the world are dried out or stale. Cream and coffee have turned rancid. The phone book is years out of date. Magazines are from a bygone era. Coins in your pocket transform to obsolescence. The world regresses to the year 1939, and then devolves further back in history. Elevators, automobiles, street trolleys, airplanes, telephones, clothes, music players, kitchen appliances – they are all substituted by antiquated versions of themselves from decades before. Then the decay starts to attack people. “On the floor of the closet a huddled heap, dehydrated, almost mummified, lay curled up. Decaying shreds of what seemingly had once been cloth covered most of it.” The predecessor to the aerosol spray version is the “Elixir of Ubique” liquid in a handmade flask that was made around the time of the American Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century. “Reality has receded; it’s lost its underlying support and it’s ebbed back to previous forms.”

The cause of all this destruction is the evil adolescent selfishness of the half-alive half-dead teenager Jory Miller, whose cadaver is in close physical proximity to all the others. Jory sucks up or eats the life of others. Families place their deceased loved ones in the Moratorium to get some more life for and from them, but the half-lifers become victims who are cannibalized by a younger and stronger life-force through the act of “hetero-psychic infusion.” Jory passed away when he was only fifteen. The Swiss Beloved Brethren Moratorium, owned by Herbert Schönheit von Vogelsang, is indeed a corrupt capitalist enterprise. Ella explains this to Joe: “Herbert is paid a great deal of money annually by Jory’s family to keep him with the others and to think up plausible reasons for doing so. And – there are Jorys in every Moratorium.” “I’ve been doing it a long time to lots of half-life people,” Jory confesses. “I eat their life, what remains of it. There’s very little in each person, so I need a lot of them. I used to wait until they had been in half-life a while, but now I must have them immediately.”

Each chapter of the novel *Ubik* has an epigraph which tells us something cryptic about the substance Ubik. What is Ubik? Ubik hints at the word “ubiquitous,” meaning “everywhere” (think “ubiquitous computing”). Ubik is a universal commodity sold by consumer culture via the discourse of advertising. Ubik is: a silent electric vehicle; a beer; a coffee; a salad dressing; a pharmaceutical pill like aspirin that relieves headaches and stomach aches; a special brand of shaving razor blade; a household and kitchen cleaning substance; a debt-consolidation loan from a bank; a hair conditioner and a hairspray; a deodorant spray or roll-on; a sleeping pill; a breakfast food you can heat in the toaster; a brassiere; a plastic wrap to keep food fresh; a bad breath freshener; and a crunchy cereal. Ubik is the universal semiotic quality shared by all objects, goods, services, and messages in postmodern society that makes you feel like a good cultural citizen who belongs to and participates in the greatness of it all!

Joe Chip’s own physical deterioration reaches the point where he cannot walk up the stairs to his hotel room in virtual Des Moines, Iowa. He feels sick. He cannot breathe. His body is disintegrating. He has no strength left. But the process leading from half-death to his final death can be stopped by the Ubik spray, sent surreptitiously into the virtual world by his friends Glenn and Ella Ranciter. In the end, Joe receives the promise of a lifetime supply of Ubik (he can renew it every day in a pharmacy) which is going to enable him to survive in that virtual world, to protect himself from the predatory greed of Jory. Philip K. Dick provides a “pataphysical” explanation of how Ubik “really works”:

It is a portable negative ionizer with a self-contained, high-voltage, low-amp unit powered by a peak-gain helium battery of 25kv. The negative ions are given a counterclockwise spin by a radically biased acceleration chamber, which creates a centripetal tendency to them so that they cohere rather than dissipate. An ion field diminishes the velocity of anti-protophasons normally present in the atmosphere; as soon as their velocity falls, they cease to be anti-protophasons and, under the principle of parity, no longer can unite with protophasons radiated from persons frozen in cold-pac; that is, those in half-life.

The world of the Moratorium in *Ubik* is both inside and outside. Joe Chip learns to abide in that world – just as Philip K. Dick learns to abide in the world of his creativity without going mad, and just as “science fiction theory” learns to abide in the world of its future vision.

taken from here: <https://www.alan-shapiro.com/the-science-fiction-world-of-philip-k-dicks-ubik/>

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